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ABSTRACT

This guide presents practical applications from a research study about the processes that schools use to initiate and sustain reforms. It examines the history of 10 elementary schools in high-poverty settings, including details of behavioral and attitudinal changes. Ten capacities were associated with the stages of successful reform. The foundational capacities were enhancing energy flow among staff, creating collective purpose, and strengthening the evolving culture. The organizational capacities were teaming, creating structures for decentralized decision-making, making structural changes, and piloting. The learning and resource management capacities were creating and maintaining a learning ethic, bringing in information and skills, and orchestrating resources while managing distractions. In the study, the capacities were not developed in isolation, nor did they follow a particular sequence. Not every capacity was present in every school, but they were common enough and important enough to be associated with most of the successful changes in the six schools. Each capacity has an explanation, an illustrative example from a specific school, and questions for reflection about how the concept can be tied to the reader's own experiences. An extended case example of one school provides material for group discussion. (Contains 38 references.) (RKJ)

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What It Takes

10 Capacities for Initiating and Sustaining School Improvement

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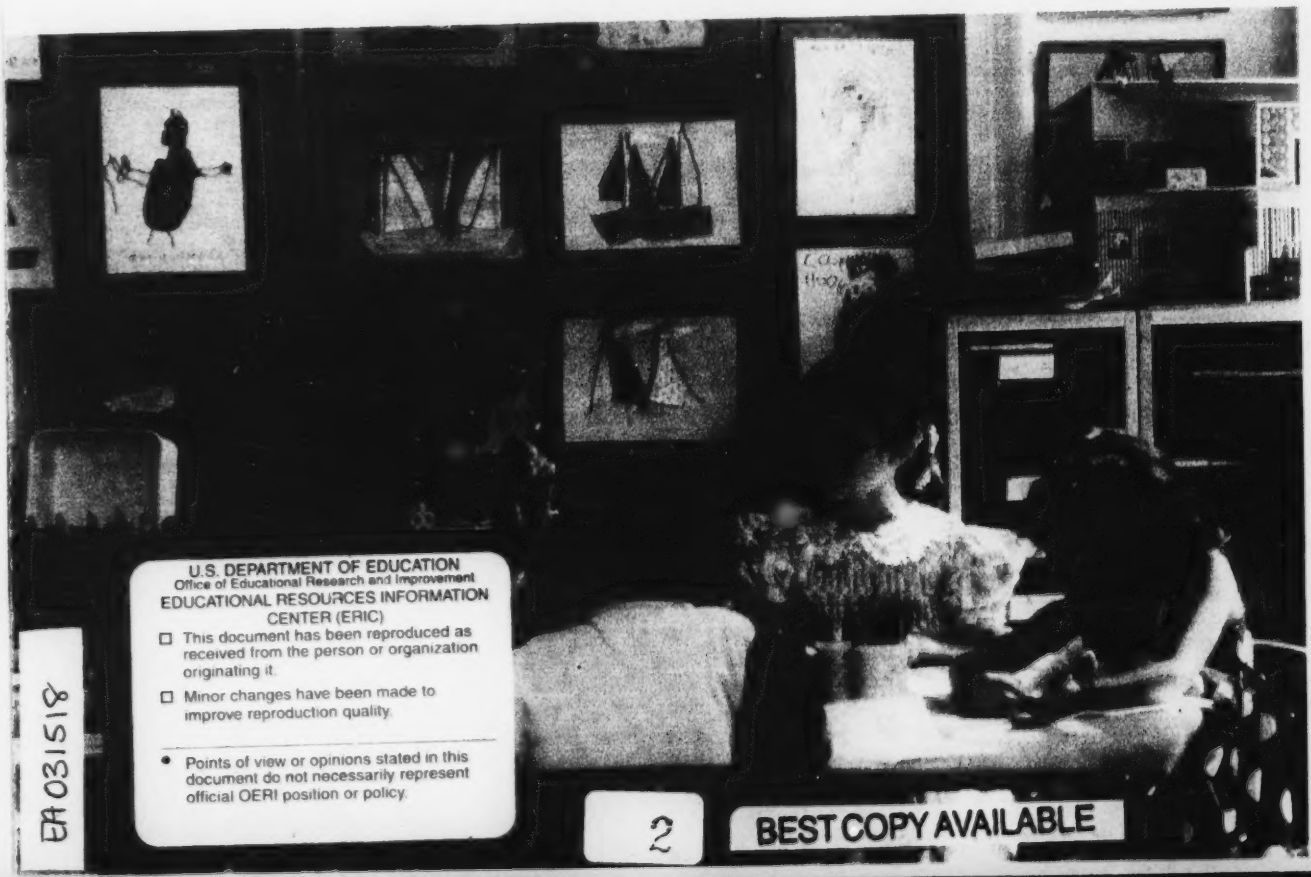

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What It Takes

10 Capacities for Initiating and Sustaining School Improvement at the Elementary Level

LAB Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory
a program of The Education Alliance at Brown University

RMC *in partnership with* RMC Research Corporation

The Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory

a program of The Education Alliance at Brown University

The LAB, a program of The Education Alliance at Brown University, is one of ten educational laboratories funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement. Our goals are to improve teaching and learning, advance school improvement, build capacity for reform, and develop strategic alliances with key members of the region's education and policy making community.

The LAB develops educational products and services for school administrators, policymakers, teachers, and parents in New England, New York, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands. Central to our efforts is a commitment to equity and excellence. Information about LAB programs and services is available by contacting:

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Introduction

Who should use this guidebook?

This guidebook presents practical applications from a research study about the processes that schools use to initiate and sustain reforms. The guidebook is for schools that are embarking on reform to use in reflecting upon current capacities in place and identifying those they need to develop. By learning from the experiences of others, educators can identify an array of possible key actions, understand more about the likely consequences of those actions, and perhaps even accelerate the pace of reform. The goal is to help school staff ask questions that promote active discussion and reflection around important issues. We recognize that the actual answers to those questions will vary by site.

Policymakers at district and state levels will also find the information about capacities useful as they develop guidance for stimulating educational reforms and design supports and incentives for schools that are trying to change practices. We know from research that external influences can either support schools to develop capacities or interfere with capacity-building attempts. By learning more about the capacity-building process, policymakers can reflect upon the likely effects of proposed actions on schools that are engaged in the improvement process.

What are the ten capacities, and how were they identified?

The following capacities associated with the developing stages of reform, and derived from our research, are described in this guidebook:

1 **enhancing energy flow among staff**
2 **creating collective purpose**
3 **strengthening the evolving culture**
4 **teaming**
5 **creating structures for decentralized decision making**
6 **making structural changes**
7 **piloting**
8 **creating and maintaining a learning ethic**
9 **bringing in information and skills**
10 **orchestrating resources and managing distractions**

The purpose of our study was to learn more about how schools become successful and then maintain that success. Thus, the interest was not in describing the attributes of successful schools, which has often been done in educational research, but rather in describing in greater detail the process of becoming a successful school and the capacities required to do so. The study elicited information about school histories and the patterns of events and changes that had occurred from members of the school community in six elementary schools. The goal was to learn about the subtleties of behavioral and attitudinal changes that are often missed in large-scale summaries of the variables that effective schools hold in common. The research was conducted in high-poverty settings to learn about the nature of reform in the most challenging settings.

It is important to note that not every capacity was present in every one of the schools. The capacities were common enough, however, and important enough to be associated with most of the successful changes that were made over time in the six schools.

What can be done to prepare school teams to use this guidebook?

Generating a "learning ethic" at the outset of discussions will increase participants' learning and enhance the likelihood of application in the school context. One way to do this is to have participants identify the kinds of environments in which they learn best as individuals. This information can then be used to establish ground rules and strategies for working together to explore the capacities.

The topics that participants might address are the physical environment, timing and pacing, interactions (for example, it is all right to disagree, we will hear each other out, we will include all perspectives), and safety (for example, within this discussion it is all right to question how we currently operate). Brief checks about the effectiveness of the ground rules at subsequent stages of discussions can sharpen them to meet the needs of the group. If ground rules have been used by the group, it may be useful to begin the discussion of a learning ethic with consideration of how the ground rules are similar to, or different from, the ways in which school staff typically interact.

How is the document organized?

The ten capacities that emerged from the study are organized into three thematic sets: foundational, organizational, and learning/resource management. For each individual capacity, we have included an explanation, an example from a school in the study to illustrate how the capacity operates in practice, and reflection questions for readers to apply to their own school experiences. At the end of the document, we provide an extended case example of one of the six schools to be used as a background piece for group discussion. A small number of practical resources is included for further reference in the final section.

Is it better to follow a particular order in developing or implementing the ten capacities?

We suggest that a school team tackle a set of capacities for discussion, rather than focusing on individual capacities, and we suggest beginning with either Set One or Set Two of the capacities. Set One is a good place to start for a team that wants to consider foundational issues of changing the culture of the school. Set Two is an appropriate beginning for a group that wants to begin with concrete strategies such as teaming or decentralizing decision-making.

The specific forms of the capacities took different shapes at different times in the development of the schools. The context shapes the specific details of a capacity that are appropriate in a given setting. The capacities were not developed in isolation, nor do they follow a particular sequence; rather, they interact and reinforce one another. Thus, step-by-step implementation is unlikely to be an effective approach.

More about the study

RMC Research Corporation, a partner in the Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory at Brown University, designed the study as a retrospective analysis of the experiences of six high-poverty elementary schools that had been nationally recognized by the Title I Recognition Program for their excellence. The schools are the Samuel Mason Elementary School in Roxbury, MA; Early Childhood Center #90 in Buffalo, NY; P.S. 139 from Community School District #22 in Brooklyn, NY; P.S. 92 from Community School District #30 in Queens, NY; P.S. 50 from Community School District #12 in the Bronx, NY; and the Fairmount Primary School in Woonsocket, RI.

The study process included (a) consultation with a representative group of the school community, including administrators, teachers, and parents, to create a group map of the history and key events in the school's development; (b) creation and analysis of analytic maps by the study team to uncover patterns of change; (c) conduct of individual and group interviews as well as observations on site to learn more about elements of the history and the capacities required at different points in time; (d) synthesis of information, including analysis of each school's sense-making strategies and capacities, to develop descriptions of capacities in place in the six schools; and (e) presentation of the findings to the schools in group settings in order to validate the results of the analyses and also learn more details about the required capacities. Elements of the original study are being replicated in studies of other effective settings to continue to learn more about capacities needed for reform in different school contexts.

Foundational Capacities

The three foundational capacities described in this section are about engaging with and connecting internal and external environments:

- enhancing energy flow among staff
- creating collective purpose
- strengthening the evolving culture

Together, these capacities describe ways that staff work together, make meaning of the context in which schools operate, and initiate and take advantage of changes in the environment. In effective reform efforts, staff work together to increase the overall energy available to their schools and develop common purposes rooted in the strengths and needs of students. They also find ways to articulate what is central to the culture of their schools.

Capacity 1: Enhancing energy flow among staff

Leaders and staff in a school work together in ways that increase the overall energy available to the school. They productively engage in creating and sustaining a school with student learning as the focus.

The level and quality of energy in a school are often apparent, but just what makes up that energy is seldom identified. Energy is made up of a complex mix of interactions:

- the experience, skills, and enthusiasm of staff
- the experience, skills, and enthusiasm that community members, parents, and students bring to the school
- the resources (human, financial, physical, informational) that are brought into the school, including external human resources such as staff developers, consultants, and district personnel

In the schools we studied, the culture brings staff, community, and external resources together to use skills profitably to further the school's mission. Energy flow is influenced by the quality and quantity of interactions among staff; the quality and quantity of interactions among staff and community, parents, and students; and the ways in which resources (financial, physical, staff time, etc.) are employed.

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When Boston schools completed their first round of recruitment for students under the new limited school choice plan in 1991, the *Boston Herald* headlined Samuel Mason as the least chosen school in the district. Rather than becoming a cause for finger pointing, that incident became the impetus for change and improvement at the school. The school used outside resources to help create a collaborative culture that increased the total energy flow. The principal and staff harnessed the new energies to improve the quality of services to students. A primary use of external talent was to increase staff skills. One example is using Accelerated Schools and school based management techniques to enhance the skills and opportunities of staff within the school.

The school moved away from the idea of principal as "captain of the ship" with all the answers toward increased participation from staff in shared leadership, thereby increasing the quantity of leadership available in the school. Staff have high expectations of each other and trust that colleagues are working toward common ends. To maintain cohesion, staff have created multiple communication channels to allow for independent action without losing the sense of the whole. Communication is predominately positive; teachers do not talk negatively about each other or about students, supporting positive energy flow.

At your school...

What have been staff members' experiences in highly energetic environments, and what can be learned from them?

Is there plenty of productive energy?

The leaders and staff in the schools we studied worked together to increase the energy available and to keep energy flowing smoothly. To do so requires reflection about current practice, willingness to entertain new information and perspectives, trust of other staff built on a history of fulfilled commitments and challenges met, and a common purpose. Events, even potentially traumatic ones, were interpreted as opportunities to mobilize energy and make appropriate changes rather than causes for panic and blame. Conflicts were resolved, not left hanging.

Positive interactions among teachers, and between teachers and students, are a hallmark of the schools in the study. Staff see each other as resources. Structures such as teams that promote regular, substantive interaction and communication among staff are in place. A group representing the whole was created (all staff or a representative group) in most schools in which to discuss issues and make important decisions. Decisions are typically made by consensus so that there is broad support. To avoid bottlenecks and promote flexibility, decisions are made at the point of action to the extent possible. The principal holds a broad view of activity in the school and of its vision, and uses this information to influence and support the energy flow. The principal also takes the time to develop a deep understanding of purpose among staff that is strong enough so that the majority of the staff can extend it on their own and in small groups.

At your school...

How do staff react to "negative" events?

Has a potentially negative event ever been used as a catalyst for creating energy?

What are the sources of energy on which you, as staff members, can build?

Are there conditions that sap energy?

What is the role of the principal in harnessing and directing the energy flow among staff?

Capacity 2: Creating collective purpose

School staff develop and maintain a common purpose for the organization that is rooted in a deep understanding of the strengths and needs of their students.

Creating collective purpose requires school staff members to have a common vision for the organization that is rooted in the strengths and needs of their students. This sense of common purpose is based in a collective understanding of the community the school serves and of the school staff's capacity to work together towards this common purpose.

Harry T. Stewart Sr. Elementary School (PS #30) in Queens, NY, has been through many changes in the recent past. In 1987, when ceilings in three classrooms collapsed, the community and staff finally realized the opportunity to design a new school for which they had long been advocating. The population of the school is low income (more than 95% of the students receive free or reduced cost lunches) and includes many new immigrants; the burgeoning population in the neighborhood has quickly begun to overcrowd the new school building. Staff describe their culture as having an emphasis on collaboration and collegiality along with the willingness to try almost anything that they think will enhance the learning of the school's students.

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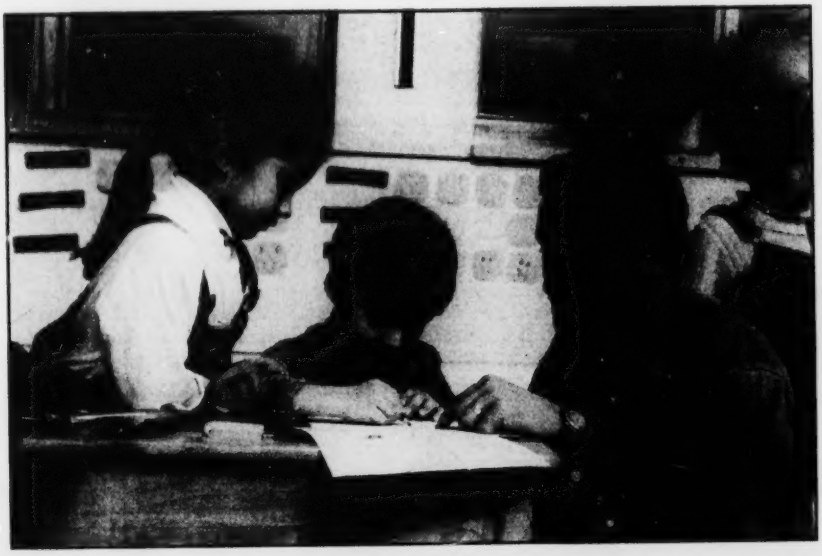
The principal and staff worked hard to establish a family atmosphere in which all students are part of the school community; staff also encourage parents and other community members to participate with students in school activities. The sense of family is especially important from the perspective of the principal because many of the school's students have already experienced displacements from moving to a new culture and now live in crowded conditions with other families. Exposure to children from diverse backgrounds offers the opportunity for creating bonds across boundaries. As a way of strengthening connections within the diverse populations of the school, the principal established many projects and events that involve all teachers and students, and often community members as well, in celebrations, contests, and creative projects that reflect the school's diversity. The school walls are covered with photographs of participants in these events. Because the staff believe that being literate in English is the foundation for life successes and life-long learning for the school's students, many of the whole-school projects involve motivation for reading and writing.

In the schools we studied, staff have created shared experiences and a common language. They also developed ways of interacting that both permit continual reflection on the extent to which they are achieving their purpose and also facilitate mid-course corrections in organization and practice to further the vision. Together they built an evolving, positive collective school identity. The set of experiences, the common language, and the structures that encourage engagement in the tasks of the school as a whole enable staff to develop confidence in each other. Consequently, they trust that other staff have internalized the common vision and share common core values and beliefs. From this base evolves trust that others will act in ways intended to promote the vision, generating the climate in which staff can independently make decisions and act on them.



At your school...

What do you know about your students—collectively and as individuals?

What engages your students? How do they learn best?

What common beliefs do staff hold? Do your actions reflect these beliefs?

Commitment to the collective identity means that staff agree to try out practices, even those about which they personally have reservations, if these practices are likely to better serve their students. At many of the schools, staff ask of each other, "What is best for the children?" when confronted with options, and openly differentiate between what might be best for children and their personal preferences. In several schools we studied, a major commitment that symbolized teachers' willingness to take this step came in deciding to move to an inclusion model. Classroom teachers in the schools that moved to inclusion had reservations about doing so based on their assumptions about the needs of special education students, but were willing to try inclusion in their classrooms because of their commitment to the school as a whole. Inclusion eventually served as the springboard for many other changes that were based on students' needs.

At your school...

Is everyone able to articulate the school's purpose?

As staff members, do you trust that you are working toward a common purpose?

Have activities been carried out that have been especially useful for creating a common purpose? What are the characteristics of these activities?

Capacity 3: Strengthening the evolving culture

Staff find ways to tell the current story of what is core in the culture of the school.

Finding ways to express what is valued in the culture of the school is especially important during times of change. Talking about the culture of the school can strengthen shared beliefs about what is important for students and what the school can accomplish. Through these discussions, a common school identity is built and shared.

Staff at P.S. 50, the Clara Barton School, in the South Bronx, consider a strong belief in the school as the central agent in shaping the future lives of their students. They believe that they need to impart to their students a vision of life outside the South Bronx, a vision that includes being a productive worker with a steady job. The teachers frequently tell each other, their students, and neighborhood families the stories of former students who have become successful, and include in those stories the role played by the school, individual staff, and parents in the students' success. Staff at Clara Barton have built the importance of employment and work life into all school activities. Former students are used as guest speakers at career days, their work places are sites for field trips. Role models for jobs and careers are brought to the school to interact with students. Entrepreneurial opportunities are part of school life. As a community school, on weekends Clara Barton becomes a literacy and computer center for the parents of students so that they might also participate in building the skills for getting a job or improving their work opportunities.

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We often heard stories about how the school was making a difference in children's lives during our visits to the six schools. Knowing and repeating stories help staff to be proud of their association with the school, reinforce the value of the efforts that individuals are making, and recognize that everyone is working toward common goals. Being able to articulate the hallmarks of the current culture allows the staff to communicate to those outside the school what the school is trying to accomplish and to indicate how far the school has developed. Developing a strong understanding of school identity involves staff and parents taking the time to talk with each other in a reflective and sustained way.

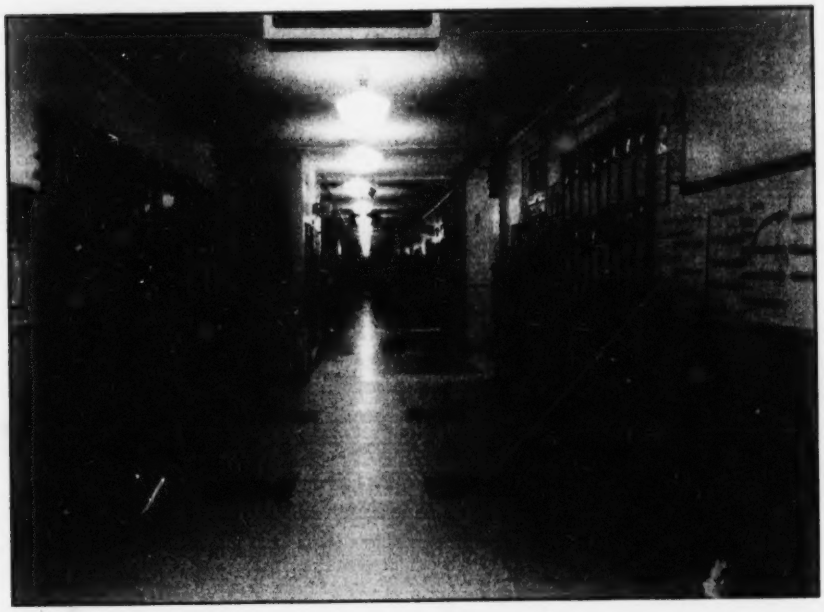
At your school...

What is done to build common identity for the school?

What are the stories you tell yourselves and others about your school, its staff, and its students?

If you asked your students and parents, in what ways might they say the school is shaping students' lives?

The power of a common culture is based on shared experiences so that the stories, examples, and pictures that are hallmarks of the culture resonate with deep meaning for those involved. The individual actions that add up to a strong history of shared experiences can be simple ones: posting photographs of group events, taking the time for celebrations of successes, providing opportunities for staff to reflect on the progress of the school, using phrases that express school identity, and inviting parents and other members of the community to participate in shared, whole-school activities.



At your school...

How would staff and parents describe the essence of what your school does for its students?

What is special about the culture of your school compared to other schools in the district?

On what occasions do you talk about your school's identity?

Organizational Capacities

In addition to enhancing energy flow among staff, creating collective purpose, and strengthening the evolving culture, the schools in this study have created structures and processes that enable them to make maximum use of expertise, energy, and initiative. Using teams and trying out new strategies and structures on a small scale (piloting) allow staff to learn from one another, generate new ideas, and refine their shared objectives in continually improving practice. The schools use decentralized decision making to involve more individuals in making and implementing decisions critical to school reform. Structural changes in these schools create new opportunities for use of time, organizing groups of students, spending funds, and deploying adult resources. Here we discuss the following four capacities:

- teaming
- creating structures for decentralized decision making
- making structural changes
- piloting

Capacity 4: Teaming

Teaming provides interaction and communication, increases the flexibility for planning and programming, encourages people to collaborate and take on new roles and responsibilities, and enables the development of a common purpose.

Teaming expands a school's vision and boundaries by involving more people, including parents, in essential processes such as decision making, curriculum revision and materials selection, and student instruction and assessment.

A major force for change at P.S. 139, District 22, Brooklyn, NY, was the process of planning and developing a schoolwide program. Using a facilitator assigned by the New York City Board of Education and building upon staff and parents' strong commitments to the school, a schoolwide program committee was created. This committee set the precedent for a consensus model that served as the process that teams in the school used to operate and negotiate. A parent historically headed the schoolwide program committee and served along with other community members, administration, and staff representatives from various grades and content areas.

Parents, staff, and administration work together to assure that diverse voices and beliefs are heard and that consensus truly results in a unity of purpose around what is "good for the whole school/all students." Building on the teaming structure created by the schoolwide program committee, P.S. 139 created teams for multiple purposes, including mini-school teams that work together to improve curriculum, resources, and structures in their mini-school.

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Teaming focuses on using individual and group strengths to meet diverse student needs and is based on the beliefs that "everyone is good at different things," that staff are "better together than apart," and that "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts."

At your school...

Do you currently have any teams? What is the staff's attitude toward teaming?

Which aspects of the school would benefit from a broader perspective or from expanded input into decision making?

Teaming promotes supportive interaction and discussion about learning and a climate of experimentation. Teaming also reduces the isolation of teachers. Ideally, teaming is directly related to school expectations for student achievement and instruction, designed with regard to other aspects of the school (for example, its culture, climate, time, and resources). Teaming should not be comprised of structures *solely* created to fulfill local, state, or federal requirements. Teaming should be flexible in its development and implementation, employing structures, processes, and roles for members that make the most sense based on the purpose of the team. Teams may be developed through group or individual initiative. Teams often develop their own rules and processes for functioning and involve a variety of staff and stakeholders as members. A variety of structures for teaming exist, including grade-level teams, cross-grade teams, looping teams, mini-school teams, and school-based management teams.

At your school...

Who currently participates on the team(s) in place?

What are the purposes of teams that exist now?

How much autonomy and power do teams have?

How well do the teams function?

Although often used for instructional support and improvements, the intent of teaming can vary: expanding opportunity and input from individuals, anchoring the school culture, and changing the structures and processes of the school in response to decentralization or major changes in curriculum. It is especially important that team members have the skill and authority to make decisions and carry them out. Teaming is not effective when team members take responsibility for actions over which they have no authority, knowledge, or direct impact.

At your school...

What types of training and support would enhance teams in your school?

What would be the negative effects of increasing the use of teams in your school?

Capacity 5: Creating structures for decentralized decision-making

Increasing the number of groups that are empowered to make and implement decisions can multiply the opportunities for identifying and applying practices that are effective for students.

Development of teacher efficacy, the belief that one can make a difference for students, relies to some extent on having enough control over practice to make the adaptations that are needed to help students succeed. Empowerment of individuals and groups implies the authority and responsibility to make and carry out decisions.

At the Samuel Mason Elementary School in Roxbury, MA, a central site-based management team coordinates a variety of other working teams, including grade level teams, in-class teams, and specific purpose teams, e.g., a school climate team that worked on discipline and a marketing team that worked on ways to attract students to the school. Teams are empowered to make real decisions. Although a team may seek the principal's advice, she does not make decisions for them.

When teams were first formed, the principal attended meetings to act as a resource. Later, she only occasionally sat in on meetings. Each working team has a liaison to the central site-based management team. The liaison presents the working team's plan to the central team for reaction; when a working team's plan gets a "go ahead" from the site-based management team, the full school votes on the plan. In this way, the central team acts in a coordinating and oversight role, ensuring that teams are focusing energies and resources on the school's central mission.

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An underlying belief is that people affected by decisions should be involved in shaping those decisions. Schools have found ways to involve many more people in decision making and, at the same time, create the structures that will ensure coordination toward common goals and facilitate communication and sharing among all staff. The overall effect can be very powerful: much work can be accomplished simultaneously in different teams, and the most challenging work of the school can be tackled from a variety of perspectives.

At your school...

To what extent is decentralized decision making used?

If it is decentralized, what structures does your school have in place for coordinating the work of teams or subcommittees?

Effective decentralized decision making rests on certain beliefs on the part of staff. Everyone needs to trust that their colleagues are interested in positive outcomes for students and that they will take actions with those outcomes in mind. That trust includes tolerance for diversity of opinion, interest in experimentation, and the willingness to recognize the failure of some experiments. Further, all need confidence that some teams or individuals, that is, site-based management team and principal, are paying attention to the interests of the whole school.

At your school...

Do most staff trust that their colleagues are working together toward positive student outcomes?

What kinds of decisions are delegated by the central decision-making team to other teams?

What proportion of staff in your school are involved in decision making?

Decentralizing decisions requires that many more individuals develop the skills to make important decisions in a collaborative setting. The skills of information analysis, problem solving, and consensus building are needed by everyone, not only a select few. Staff need to be honest about each other's strengths and weaknesses and also believe that they can influence each other.

Decentralizing decision making also requires effective two-way communication strategies so that everyone is well-informed about the actions of various teams. Communication vehicles that have been used by schools to broadcast information include school newsletters, common bulletin boards, team presentations at faculty meetings, and use of a common memorandum/report format for summarizing team actions to facilitate sharing. To ensure widespread participation, techniques for gathering information from the full school community are as important as communicating the actions of teams.

At your school...

How are decisions communicated to the full school community?

Are you able to have staff conversations about your school's strengths and weaknesses?

Capacity 6: Making structural changes

Staff use structural changes as a source of energy to catalyze reforms in how the school functions and to open up new ways of looking at students and their potential.

The most successful types of structural reforms 1) acknowledge the current resources of the school (that is, the available staff, time, and space); 2) are linked to student strengths and needs and curricular emphases; and 3) are related to high expectations for students. Structural changes can be realized in the way time is used, the way groups of students are organized, the way funds are spent, and the way adult resources are deployed. It is important that the reason for structural change be improvement of student outcomes on the part of those who believe the change will make a difference. This approach implies an opportunity for teachers to suggest and shape structural reforms, try them out, evaluate the results, and then adapt practice to improve outcomes. Because teacher "buy-in" is critical, the pacing of structural change needs to allow for variation in implementation. For example, the administrators in our schools did not immediately expect the same level of participation from all staff nor the same level of interest in each approach.

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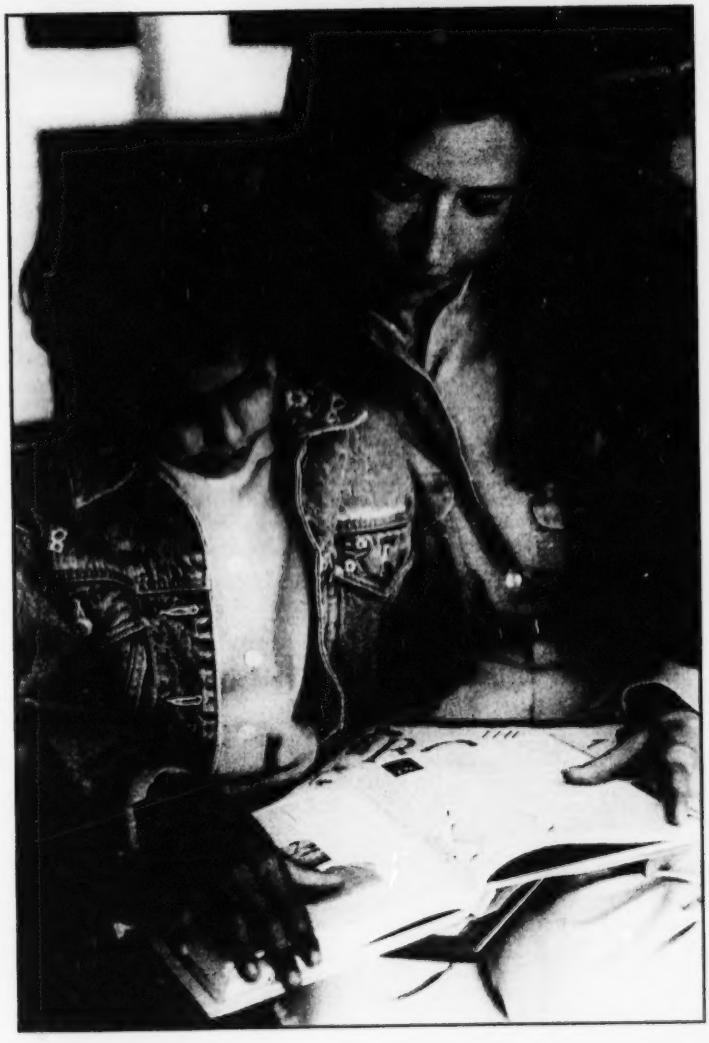
At your school...

When your school has implemented structural changes, what have been the results?

What types of structural changes might make a difference for your students? Why?

What other consequences would those changes be likely to have?

Structural changes seem to inspire other types of reforms because they provide new opportunities for teachers to interact with each other, as well as with students and their parents. Mini-schools that allow siblings to be in the same stream facilitate building relationships with parents. Teachers learn new techniques from the other adults who work in their classrooms. Increasing adult interaction about children multiplies the number of people who know about and care for the children of the school. Further, teachers may see students in a different light when they have the opportunity for more individual time, or when they get to know the student better, or see the student interact with children of different ages or abilities. Changes in school schedules, such as providing longer blocks of instructional time, facilitate new types of learning activities, often more intense than previous opportunities. Some options for changing schedules include block scheduling, creating literacy time blocks, lowering the teacher-student ratio for specific subjects, after-school programming, and Saturday programming.



At your school...

If parents could choose, what kinds of structural changes would they make in your school?

Which types of potential changes worry you? Why?

Fairmount Primary School in Woonsocket, RI, altered classroom configurations in a number of ways, including creating classrooms in which up to half of the students are special education students; using looping to ensure that students have a stable relationship with a teacher for two years; developing multi-age and heterogeneously grouped classes; and promoting team teaching among classroom teachers, special education staff, and Title I staff. The changes were sparked by the principal, who inspired creative use of the limited classroom space available when she encouraged teachers to try different grouping patterns.

Capacity 7: Piloting

By piloting—trying out new strategies and structures on a small scale—staff bring new ideas and energy into the school, exercise their skills as decision makers, and refine the collective understanding of objectives for continually improving practice.

Opportunities for piloting can originate from many sources, including school staff, ideas derived from state or national conferences and associations, district office initiatives, state and national education programs, and professional development opportunities offered by higher education or corporate partners. Innovations tried by the schools in our study included regrouping students, engaging interns and parents to extend instructional time, and employing performance assessments. Piloting is usually voluntary on the part of the school and staff, and may be accompanied by resources (for example, money, consultants, or waivers) that help facilitate the implementation and evaluation of the strategy, structure, program, or materials being piloted. Larger scale adoption may result from pilots, or ideas may be adopted in different degrees at different paces among school staff. For instance, pilots of structural change may survive as mini-schools, pilots of reflection processes and assessments may become whole-school planning and evaluation processes, and instructional strategies initiated in selected classrooms may be expanded to all students.

At your school...

What might be useful to pilot?

What resources would be needed to conduct a pilot?

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Piloting works best when it is viewed as open-ended and experimental—a process through which outcomes are discovered, rather than based on predetermined conclusions. Having an open-ended, experimental perspective on the piloting process promotes low-risk, hands-on ways for staff to try out new roles and perspectives and discover new solutions to school needs. Piloting, no matter its origin, needs an environment of trust, cohesion around beliefs, and unity without uniformity for success. In-house expertise and new sources of input for decision making are developed during the piloting process.

At your school...

- *Which of your staff are ready to try out pilots?*

If a pilot is a "failure" or if a new strategy is not adopted, the pilot can still be a learning experience regardless of what is continued; piloting should not be viewed as "all or nothing," but rather as a process for identifying those parts of a program that may be kept, changed, or discarded. Pilots are not implemented at only one time or in only one program at a time; the flow of pilots can be continual if based on the school's focus and accompanied by reflection and evaluation processes that capture important findings from the pilot and communicate these findings to internal and external stakeholders.

At your school...

If you have used piloting as a technique, what have you learned?

What supports and what diminishes piloting as an option in your school?

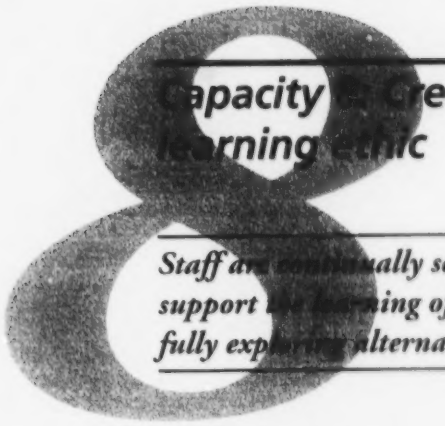
From its inception, the Early Childhood Center #90 in Buffalo, NY was a site used by the district to try out approaches for the city's early childhood centers. A portfolio assessment pilot was combined with a testing waiver from the district to give the school more flexibility in assessing the achievement of students in early grades. Multi-age classrooms, learning styles instruction, and cooperative learning pilots added to staff members' skills by giving them opportunities to try out new instructional skills and processes. The King Center program (multi-age, pre-K to kindergarten) and Heritage program (special education inclusion, pre-K) were piloted and sustained in selected classrooms, along with supporting resources and materials. Other instructional and structural changes were expanded or discarded, based on their successes or on available resources. Many of the pilots implemented at Early Childhood Center #90 were accompanied by intensive professional development in different content areas and teaching strategies to help support the implementation and adaptation required by the pilots.

Learning and Resource Management Capacities

There is significant interaction among the following three capacities, yet each has distinguishing elements.

- Creating and maintaining a learning ethic is aligned with the literature on learning organizations and illustrates how staff have made professional development an integral part of how they think and work.
- Bringing in information and skills is a capacity that describes how the school staff relate to the external environment in ways that support the school as an organization through the development of staff expertise.
- Orchestrating resources and managing distractions describes how the school staff make choices about the use of the resources at their disposal to support the larger purpose of the school. The capacity also describes how they maintain boundaries so that school staff do not become overwhelmed with the quantity and nature of external distractions—distractions that are sometimes difficult to resist because they are generally offered with the intention of improving some aspect of the school's program.

Together, the three capacities help to support the collective purpose of the school and provide energy that contributes to the overall energy flow in the organization.



Capacity 8: Creating and maintaining a learning ethic

Staff are continually seeking out and learning ways to better support the learning of their students; they define success as fully exploring alternatives.

The schools in our study are places in which both students and staff are continually learning new skills and knowledge. Staff use a solid base of professional knowledge and experience as well as information about their students' interests, needs, and skills to identify important issues they should explore. Some exploration is done by the whole school, some by groups or teams of teachers. Yet other topics are initially explored by a single staff person who brings back information or recommendations to others.

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Major changes were initiated at Early Childhood Center #90 in Buffalo, NY through professional development. Staff participated in workshops on integrated language arts, cooperative learning, and learning styles. Each teacher was expected to write individual learning goals that addressed personal learning interests. Once internal professional development activities were in place, a second step in creating a learning ethic consisted of sending staff to professional development activities outside the school and district. A requirement for those who participated in these opportunities was that they present information about what they learned to other staff when they returned. As this process became institutionalized, staff served as scouts looking for approaches that would meet the needs of the school and its children. They became increasingly good shoppers for approaches that they might adapt to improve practice within the school.

Within the building, small groups of staff were encouraged to try out approaches that they had learned about through reading and professional development in order to determine whether they would be useful in the school's context and for their students. These pilots were learning exercises carried out by thoughtful professionals. Often small groups of teachers in the school employed different instructional approaches because their decisions were based on an understanding of alternative approaches, the needs of particular students, and the specific skills of the teachers involved. Because these three factors were taken into account, there was seldom a single answer to a complex question that could be prescribed across the school. As staff learned from their experimentation, they were encouraged to codify and articulate their learning by presenting workshops to educators outside the school.

In the schools we studied, the focus of learning is on the development of new professional practice that addresses the needs of the school and enhances each person's capacity to effectively engage all students in academic learning.

At your school...

To what extent do staff regularly meet to talk about what they have learned about a particular program?

What issues do they identify as necessary to address in order to serve student needs?

A learning ethic is brought into being and maintained by a series of expectations and supports that permeate the school culture. School leadership creates a supportive atmosphere in which all staff are expected to be highly competent professionals and to continue their learning. School leaders seek out resources and create opportunities for professional development and staff interactions about teaching and learning. As part of the culture, staff routinely engage each other in questioning and experimentation. Along with these expectations for learning and competence is an understanding that staff cannot become instantly effective when learning new skills. Success is defined as thoughtfully trying out carefully selected ideas or approaches, not as succeeding with each one that is tried.

At your school...

When do staff come together to talk about teaching and learning?

What are the expectations for staff to continue their professional development?

Learning takes place through formal professional development activities as well as through other strategies. Other strategies include teaming, piloting, coaching, bringing professional development specialists into the school and classrooms, and creating special relationships with organizations that have resources and expertise that the school can use. For instance, opportunities for graduate education and certification in additional fields may be built into professional development opportunities through a special relationship with an institution of higher education. These multiple strategies for professional growth and the philosophy behind them keep professional staff vitally engaged in continually making adjustments to support the learning and development of their students.

At your school...

What projects or programs have provided staff with opportunities to explore new strategies for better meeting the needs of students?

What are the ways in which time, money, and encouragement are provided for individuals or groups of staff to engage in professional development?

Capacity 9: Bringing in information and skills

School staff are active shoppers for information and skills to strengthen and expand their capacities. New information and skills add to staff expertise, suggest new structures and practices to try, and provide the school with an external mirror of professional expectations.

Staff in the six schools play an active role in defining their needs and in shaping and selecting responses to these needs. The principals and staff of these schools spend time scanning the environment for opportunities and making staff aware of them. The environment includes professional organizations and other groups that are developing new instructional techniques and materials; businesses in the area that may be able to provide them with materials or training; sources of grants; and the schools' own district offices.

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The staff at P.S. #50, The Clara Barton School in CSD #12, Bronx, NY, have developed sophisticated skills in finding, securing, and using outside information and skills to strengthen the capacity of the staff and the school's ability to meet multiple needs of students. Combining the principal's and staff's skills in networking and grant writing to secure external money and materials with a whole-school focus on improving the lives of children in the community, P.S. #50 seeks out grant programs and resource providers who simultaneously supply focused, sustained staff training and support. For instance, the Waterford Computer Lab established at the school provides computers for student use and staff development for teachers on technology. An affiliation with Wave Hill and other environmental studies sites created a series of multi-session workshops on hands-on environmental sciences for both teachers and students. An Arts in Early Childhood program used local artists in 5-day residencies at the school. Teachers at P.S. #50 were exposed to a step-by-step process in puppet making/creative dramatics by resident artists in their classrooms. Professional development at P.S. #50 is organized to mitigate teacher burnout and allow for peer support, grade groups or content groups participate together in training and support each other in adopting, adapting, and implementing skills and information.

At these schools, part of a staff's skills as shoppers include the ability to identify and select from the vast array of possibilities in the environment those resources that are most likely to meet the needs of the school and its students. They often select parts of externally developed programs and integrate them into a coherent, internally-developed approach that meets the school's needs, rather than importing entire externally-developed programs. Staff are willing to try out new initiatives, for example, in order to bring training and materials into the school. Teachers and parents have developed skills as grant writers in order to enlarge the pool of people who can secure outside resources.

At your school...

What mechanisms currently exist for bringing in new information? for training staff? for disseminating knowledge?

What are the organizational supports for seeking out information and skills?

What gets in the way of efficiently seeking out new information and skills?

The use of the skills and information gathered helps to support a culture of "learning," often through small-scale experimentation—that is, trying out a new instructional strategy, educational program, or structure and critically assessing its fit to the goals and the culture of the school. Individuals and small groups may scout the information and bring it back to the rest of the school for training, piloting, or modeling.

At your school...

How do staff who go outside the school for professional development communicate new learning to others?

In what types of piloting, mentoring, or partnerships that promote shared learning do staff currently engage?

As with other aspects of school change, resources and support are important for bringing in information and skills. The scouting and bringing in of external information and skills is viewed by administration as necessary for supporting staff and school capacity; resources to do so are seen as a necessity, not a luxury. A school may ask its district or state for assistance in identifying sources or making training available, as opposed to accepting pre-designed training provided by the district or state. It is vital that the principal fully support staff and find ways to make it happen, often by redirecting resources and seeing that information and skills gathered are used in ways that contribute to a climate of experimentation, increased energy, and flexibility.

10 Capacity to Orchestrate Resources and Managing Distractions

School students have the skills and confidence to act as wise consumers and managers of resources, paying close attention to the ways existing resources are employed to maximize effectiveness for students, constantly exploring new opportunities, and resisting distractions that would interfere with the mission.

Staff in the schools in our study are always thinking about ways to get more from the resources at their disposal, including staff time, materials, space, and budgets. With the goal of better meeting students' needs, they are continually creative in thinking about ways to reorganize and do things differently. Further, they find ways to augment the range of offerings by reaching out to take advantage of opportunities offered by the district, state, or community.

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Staff at Samuel Mason Elementary School in Roxbury, MA, have developed the skills to take advantage of resources in creative ways to extend their abilities to challenge students. A primary reason the school became a schoolwide program was the flexibility to use resources for all students. Staff decided that their focus would be the classroom and, with limited library resources at their disposal, decided that funding for books would be primarily channeled directly to classrooms. To restructure the school day, the principal negotiated an arrangement with the district to hire working artists to teach art and music; facilitating scheduling of all specialities in the afternoon. The schedule change allowed the school rather than the district to have control over instructional time. An agreement with the local YWCA enabled Mason students to have weekly swimming lessons for physical education. The school developed a partnership with Wheelock College to bring the support of Master's degree teacher interns, as well as teacher educators into the classroom. The principal spent time thinking about the likely impact of upcoming district/state policy changes (for example, site-based management) on the school so that the school and its staff could be positioned to take advantage of them and not be overwhelmed by new expectations.

In recent years, many schools have taken advantage of the Title I schoolwide option to restructure operations. As state reform efforts multiply, some schools have found that offering to try out new practices gives them a distinct advantage in finding resources.

At your school...

What steps have been taken to realign the use of resources to better serve students?

How would existing resources be re-allocated to better meet current school needs in an ideal world?

Staff are proactive in developing relationships and networks with those who may have access to resources and also in negotiating special relationships or waivers to facilitate more effective use of resources. The locus of control for using and discarding information and skills, and for reallocating resources, is at the school level and is informed by the staff most directly affected, as opposed to being controlled by the principal, district, state, or other service providers.

At your school...

In what ways are staff currently connected to networks and organizations that provide access to resources?

How might current connections be expanded?

A part of managing resources includes wariness of externally imposed limits or controls that might have a negative impact on the school's mission or on the ability of teachers to maintain the flexibility to adapt practice to meet students' needs. Principals and teachers are willing to take risks to hold off external demands or well-intentioned offers that might detract from serving students, as well as take risks to implement changes that they believe are important for their students.

At your school...

Has a program been closed and the time and resources reallocated?

If not, where might this be done to good advantage?

Has there been successful resistance to an external initiative that staff honestly thought would not be to the advantage of its students?

If not, what has been the cost?

Case Example

This section presents an extended example of the ten capacities in action. The example is a case of the Samuel Mason Elementary School of the Boston Public Schools, one of the six participating schools.

This case overviews selected activities and events at the Samuel Mason Elementary School, as it created a focus for the school based on meeting the needs of all students; expanded leadership among its staff; designed professional development; and used assessment data to monitor student and school progress.

As illustrated, the ten capacities are interwoven into the daily activities of the Samuel Mason Elementary School.

Readers can use this case as a discussion tool for identifying

- where specific capacities played important roles in the development of the school
- how the work of the school created opportunities for and enhanced specific capacities
- when and how capacities became interwoven in practice

This case reflects events and personnel at the school during the time period between 1991-1997. It is drawn from:

- data collected by LAB staff at the school using a group facilitation process
- data collected by LAB staff at the school during individual interviews
- findings and products developed by LAB staff about the study
- school-produced documents and materials
- state and federal documents of recognition awards and student assessment data
- materials for the Improving America's School Conference (December 1997, Washington, DC) presented by Ms. Jonna Casey, teacher at Samuel Mason Elementary School

Samuel Mason Elementary School, Boston Public Schools

Taking stock of the school and creating a focus

When the Boston Herald ran a headline announcing that Samuel Mason Elementary School was the least chosen school in the district—after the Boston Public Schools completed the first round of recruitment for student choice in 1991—staff at Samuel Mason knew changes had to happen. But in order to make changes, the school first had to understand its current status and then develop a vision of the future.

To do this, Samuel Mason began using the Accelerated Schools taking stock process. The school started out unsophisticated in its ability to reflect, but using this process, which focuses on the strengths of the school and its students, was especially useful to the staff. All were involved in looking at the strengths of children, including children who had traditionally failed in the system. It took time for staff to learn the inquiry process, but this was facilitated by forming teams around particular challenges the school was facing. The school voted as a staff to identify the most outstanding challenges.

Mary Russo, the principal at the time, led the process, and five staff members were also trained in Accelerated Schools. Each of the five staff members took a role in presenting/training other school staff on the Accelerated Schools process. Parents were involved in this visioning process.

In addition to the Accelerated Schools taking stock process, staff at Samuel Mason participated in John Hancock customer service training to help the school put emphasis on quality. The process of getting everyone involved in brainstorming best ideas, along with the disciplined approach to narrowing down ideas, was especially helpful. Samuel Mason now pilots ideas, checks results, implements on a broader scale if appropriate, and continues to evaluate. The school constantly evaluates what it is doing. For example, when the 2nd-3rd grade level team wanted to implement a new reading program, they tried a pilot program, checked their results, refined the program, implemented it on a small scale, and did further research to add best practice ideas.

Continuous learning and problem solving are habits that staff at Samuel Mason use to plan and evaluate activities in light of the school's core mission. From the John Hancock professional development, staff learned how to do problem solving and take part in democratic decision making and team building—all essential in the transition to being a Title I Schoolwide Project school. Through Accelerated Schools training, staff gained skills in inquiry/taking stock and program evaluation. These skills are used every day in the school as staff evaluate programs and solicit resources and grants. The school has also learned new techniques and structures for assessment through its Wheelock College training partnership.

Samuel Mason has reached the stage of continuous learning with a core mission that is child-focused. This common purpose creates values and beliefs that each staff person can pick up from peers and translate to parents, business partners, and even students. The school focuses on academics and this focus translates to everything it does. In pursuing partnerships, the school guards against straying from its core mission and taking on agendas that may not be focused on learning.

Meeting the needs of all students

Through the Accelerated Schools taking stock process, the Samuel Mason staff looked at many strengths, including those of parents, teachers, the community, the school, and its staff. This reflection heightened the school's awareness and discomfort about how special education students were doing academically. The staff had to articulate their values about ***all*** children and what they really meant by the values. An interesting insight gleaned by the participants during the process related to how staff were able to identify positive things about children and community, whereas in the past they had dwelled on the negative.

Samuel Mason consistently uses its core mission as the framework from which to design professional development, to pilot programs, and to establish partnerships. Each passing year, and every thoughtful change made at the school, has helped it move closer to its vision of all students being successful. The school's outlook has taken on a future focus—thinking about what the school will have to look like in the years to come to serve its clients of the future. Through its training with

John Hancock Financial Services, administration and staff learned skills to attract parents and students to the school and market the quality of the school.

Staff at Samuel Mason developed a "Customer Service Focus" as a result of being the least-chosen school in Boston Public Schools and seeing the need to attract parents and students. Administration and staff had to learn how to use staff and their talents differently as they developed alternative classroom structures and scheduling to meet the academic needs of students. Curriculum revision emerged from early decisions around staffing and classroom configuration, and the emerging self-evaluation/inquiry culture of the school. The change from thinking about the deficits of children to thinking about the strengths of children, and viewing children as learners, led to many of the changes in scheduling, classroom structure, use of staff, and inclusion.

Administrators and the Schoolwide Program team had to learn alternative and creative ways to use resources as they expanded the school's programming. Changes in staffing and scheduling of the classes were facilitated by the use of waivers, district support, and piloting of programs. Administration and staff began defining what they needed from consultants instead of simply accepting what outsiders routinely offered. The school negotiated an arrangement with the district so that part-time specialists who are professionals in their fields could be hired to teach art and music. The development of partnerships started as a means to expand the funding, resources, and access to professional development for staff and students; an example is the partnership with Wheelock College which brings the support of teacher interns and the expertise of teacher educators into classrooms. The school has also developed relationships with the community; students use the local YWCA swimming pool on a weekly basis for physical education. Business partners have donated computers and other materials to the school.

Professional development

During its transition, Samuel Mason did lose some staff who transferred to other schools in the district. When this staff turnover occurred, the principal used it as an opportunity to recruit new staff who believed in the school's vision and had new skills (Special Education dual-certification). The school has also learned how to structure and choose professional development to meet needs. The school stresses the importance of paralleling high expectations for children with high expectations for teachers; teachers are expected to continue to learn, inquire, experiment, and be reflective. When approaching and designing professional development, the school took control and made its own choices based on its current needs and core mission.

In collaboration, teachers, parents, and the principal designed a professional development model that includes ongoing professional development with shared responsibility for implementing, monitoring, and updating its various components: whole-school training events; school-based and external workshops and courses (both for teams and individuals); model classrooms and classroom visits; lead teachers and university liaisons providing coaching, mentoring, and demonstrations; study groups; summer externships through the school's business partner; grant-funded release days; and personal professional development plans for all school staff. Professional development opportunities are provided to parents through monthly workshops, Family Center weekly activities, and participation in summer externships provided by John Hancock Financial Services.

Teachers have acquired extensive expertise and instructional strategies through the comprehensive professional development model at Samuel Mason. Using these skills and knowledge, teachers use writing as a key tool for instruction at all grade levels. They developed, in collaboration with Wheelock College consultants, a hybrid reading program that incorporates strategies of shared reading, guided reading, reading aloud, interactive writing, shared writing, and making use of a writer's workshop and independent reading and writing. They also created an intensive early literacy program team-taught by lead teachers and kindergarten teachers, and they moved computers into each classroom to promote daily, integrated instruction.

Assessment

Samuel Mason Elementary School uses a variety of methods to measure students' progress across a range of indicators. This includes standardized tests administered in grades 3 and 5, once per year, by the Boston Public Schools, along with Clay's Reading Observation Survey to test Kindergarten students' reading abilities in the fall, winter, and spring. School staff use the Dolch Sight Word List for students in grades 1-5 to test reading and writing abilities in the fall, winter, and spring, and Meisels' Work Sampling Assessment to assess student performance in early childhood classes three times per year. Monthly writing samples are required for students in grades 1-5. Students present displays and exhibits of their work in writing, math, art, and science twice per year and read aloud to community members twice per year.

These assessment methods are coordinated into a six-week cycle whereby teacher teams continuously collect and analyze data to inform changes in a student's instructional program. The goal of the self-assessment system is to enable staff to intervene in a timely and direct way to accelerate students' progress. Teachers develop plans for each student to address areas of need, and teacher teams meet weekly to discuss the impact of interventions to meet such needs.

In addition to collecting assessment data on each student, staff at Samuel Mason Elementary engage in a two-component self-assessment system. This consists of action research conducted annually by teachers along with team research conducted by grade-level teams. This two-component system is meant to ensure that the school as a whole and its teams focus on student learning and engage in continuous improvement. Mid-year and end-of-year reports outline current goals, preliminary results, necessary resources and supports, student outcomes, recommendations for program changes, and future goals.

Professional development for teachers to design Samuel Mason's self-assessment systems was arranged by the school's business partner, John Hancock Financial Services, and conducted by consultants from the Forum Corporation. Together, school staff, business personnel, and consultants designed a comprehensive training and support program to adapt Total Quality Management concepts to school-based instructional programs. Coaching for teacher teams was provided by the

school's principal and consultants to assist teams in enhancing the quality of their data gathering, analysis, and application of findings. Over time, teams learned to focus their efforts on high-impact issues, set up pilots, and use measurement processes to track outcomes. The self-assessment system at Samuel Mason enables data to drive school decisions, gauge progress, and aim for continuous improvement. Information from this system informs annual team plans for instruction, resource allocation, and grant development.

Leadership

Trust and professionalism are key elements of the culture at the Samuel Mason School. All staff are considered an integral part of the school and play key roles in the education of students. The school regards parents as co-equals with staff in a child's education, and parents play a key role on the school-based decision making leadership team and all other school teams.

The principal knew that she needed to move herself and her staff from the idea of principal as "captain of the ship" with all the answers to a culture that encouraged whole-school participation and the sharing of leadership. The principal focused on learning how to share power to bring out people's power and creativity, while making sure that the school mission was achieved and accountability met. For example, as grant writing and other entrepreneurial activities began to be pursued, more staff learned how to write and secure grants. As the school gained recognition, staff became more involved in doing presentations about the school and communicating to potential funders and partners. When the early childhood staff took on the role of researching programs, hiring their own consultant, and working closely with that consultant one day a week through observation and modeling, then they really changed classroom practice. The principal purposely did not participate in the interviewing or consultant selection, but did try to find grant money and resources to support staff work.

The principal believes that teams at the school should do their own problem solving, even though in some cases it might be easier for her to make a decision or come up with the answer herself. She is focused on creating a climate of trust for decision making. Many of her ideas

about leadership have come from thinking about leadership in a reform context and reading literature outside of education. The role of the principal is still very important in decentralized decision making—that person still needs to have an overview of the whole school while also being a team member. Future-oriented thinking is very important for a principal; the principal at Samuel Mason noted that "in some aspects of change you are at a different place on the learning curve and you have to work with teachers and parents to bring them up the curve; sometimes you have to take a stronger leadership role and keep people focused on the basic core mission." The principal also believes that people's energy around leadership ebbs and flows based on stages of reform, interest, time, and personal stresses, so leadership cannot be localized in one or two staff. Therefore, the system at Samuel Mason supports consciously involving people by personally coaching them and approaching new people to take on leadership roles.

Having the opportunity to take advantage of Accelerated Schools training and school-based decision making pilots, the principal was able to expand the leadership responsibility across the school. The district provided money for a facilitator from Boston University to help the school in its early school-based decision making process. The facilitator helped the principal and team reflect on team meetings and the roles of the team members.

There are many working teams—for example, grade-level teams and ad hoc teams (such as a school climate team that worked on discipline and a marketing team that worked on ways to attract students to the school). Teams are formed as needs arise, and when their work is done they are disbanded. Teams are empowered to make "real" decisions.

Having teachers work in teams opened up their perceptions of what could be done in the classroom and school and of how teacher talents might be used. Through school-based decision making training and school-wide program teaming, staff and administration learned team management and decision making skills. School-based decision making processes and teaming were vital in changing staff's roles, responsibilities, and ways of interacting.

Epilogue

- **Continued effectiveness.** The schools in this study were recognized nationally for their effectiveness in 1995; the study was conducted during the 1996-97 school year. As is true in all school settings, many changes have occurred since that time: principals have moved on to other schools or district offices, population increases have led to overcrowding in some sites, new requirements have been added by districts and states, key parents have become involved in other schools as their children have moved to the middle grades, and assessments have become more challenging. We have some evidence, however, that the foundation provided by the ten capacities continues to support effectiveness in these schools.

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